ANTHONY ASHLEY COOPER,
THIRD EARL OF SHAFTESBURY

Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times

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A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm to My Lord *****[A]

What prevents the man of mirth
from telling the truth?[1]

September 1707

My Lord,

Now you are returned to . . . . ., and, before the season comes which must engage you in the weightier matters of state, if you care to be entertained a while with a sort of idle thoughts, such as pretend only to amusement and have no relation to business or affairs, you may cast your eye slightly on what you have before you. And if there be anything inviting, you may read it over at your leisure.

It has been an established custom for poets, at the entrance of their work, to address themselves to some Muse, and this practice of the ancients has gained so much repute that even in our days we find it almost constantly imitated. I cannot but fancy, however, that this imitation, which passes so currently with other judgments, must at some time or other have stuck a little with your Lordship, who is used to examine things by a better standard than that of fashion or the common taste. You must certainly have observed our poets under a

[A] 'Enthusiasm' derives from the Greek for 'possession by a god'. In the seventeenth century, the term referred, negatively, to the claim to be immediately inspired by God although it could also refer to other delusional claims and to intense religious emotionality. Shaftesbury used the term in these senses but also, in the course of the essay, gave the term a positive meaning, the 'sublime in human passions' (p. 27): see Introduction, p. xxx. The addressee was John Baron Somers, Whig statesman, intellectual and patron, for whom see Introduction, p. xix. On the circumstances of publication, see Introduction, p. xxx. The original 1708 edition, printed by John Morphew, contained the following 'to the reader': 'This letter must have been written, as plainly appears, about the middle or latter end of last summer and, in all probability, was designed to be kept private. But though it came afterwards to be seen abroad in several hands, the printer could not obtain his copy till very lately, or you had had it more in season' (p. 3).

[1] Horace, *Satires* 1.1.24–5.

remarkable constraint, when obliged to assume this character, and you have wondered perhaps why that air of enthusiasm, which sits so gracefully with an ancient, should be so spiritless and awkward in a modern. But, as to this doubt, your Lordship would have soon resolved yourself, and it could only serve to bring across you a reflection you have often made on many occasions besides, that truth is the most powerful thing in the world, since even fiction itself must be governed by it and can only please by its resemblance.[2] The appearance of reality is necessary to make any passion agreeably represented. And to be able to move others, we must first be moved ourselves, or at least seem to be so, upon some probable grounds. Now what possibility is there that a modern, who is known never to have worshipped Apollo or owned any such deity as the Muses, should persuade us to enter into his pretended devotion and move us by his feigned zeal in a religion out of date?[B] But as for the ancients, it is known they derived both their religion and polity from the Muses' art. How natural therefore must it have appeared in any, but especially a poet of those times, to address himself in raptures of devotion to those acknowledged patronesses of wit and science? Here the poet might with probability feign an ecstasy, though he really felt none, and, supposing it to have been mere affectation, it would look however like something natural and could not fail of pleasing.

But perhaps, my Lord, there was a further mystery in the case. Men, your Lordship knows, are wonderfully happy in a faculty of deceiving themselves whenever they set heartily about it. And a very small foundation of any passion will serve us not only to act it well, but even to work ourselves into it beyond our own reach. Thus, by a little affectation in love-matters and with the help of a romance or novel, a boy of fifteen or a grave man of fifty may be sure to grow a very natural coxcomb and feel the *belle passion*[C] in good earnest. A man of tolerable good nature who happens to be a little piqued may, by improving his resentment, become a very fury for revenge. Even a good Christian, who would needs be over-good and thinks he can never believe enough, may, by a small inclination well improved, extend his faith so largely as to comprehend in it not only all scriptural and traditional miracles, but a solid system of old wives' stories. Were it needful, I could put your Lordship in mind of an eminent, learned, and truly Christian prelate you once knew,

[B] In Greek mythology, the Muses were nine divine sisters, the children of Zeus (the Roman Jupiter or Jove) and Mnemosyne or Memory, who inspired the varieties of the arts and learning. Apollo, another child of Zeus, was, independently of the Muses, associated with the support of music and poetry; some ancient writers identified him, however, as leader of the Muses.

[C] The tender passion or love.

[2] See pp. 65-6, 448-9.

who could have given you a full account of his belief in fairies.[D] And this, methinks, may serve to make appear how far an ancient poet's faith might possibly have been raised together with his imagination.

But we Christians, who have such ample faith ourselves, will allow nothing to poor heathens. They must be infidels in every sense. We will not allow them to believe so much as their own religion, which we cry is too absurd to have been credited by any besides the mere vulgar. But if a reverend Christian prelate may be so great a volunteer in faith as, beyond the ordinary prescription of the catholic Church, to believe in fairies, why may not a heathen poet, in the ordinary way of his religion, be allowed to believe in Muses? For these, your Lordship knows, were so many divine persons in the heathen creed and were essential in their system of theology. The goddesses had their temples and worship, the same as the other deities, and to disbelieve the Holy Nine or their Apollo was the same as to deny Jove himself and must have been esteemed equally profane and atheistical by the generality of sober men. Now what a mighty advantage must it have been to an ancient poet to be thus orthodox and, by the help of his education and a good will into the bargain, to work himself up to the belief of a divine presence and heavenly inspiration? It was never surely the business of poets in those days to call revelation in question, when it evidently made so well for their art. On the contrary, they could not fail to animate their faith as much as possible when, by a single act of it well enforced, they could raise themselves into such angelical company.

How much the imagination of such a presence must exalt a genius we may observe merely from the influence which an ordinary presence has over men. Our modern wits are more or less raised by the opinion they have of their company, and the idea they form to themselves of the persons to whom they make their addresses. A common actor of the stage will inform us how much a full audience of the better sort exalts him above the common pitch. And you, my Lord, who are the noblest actor and of the noblest part assigned to any mortal on this earthly stage, when you are acting for liberty and mankind, does not the public presence, that of your friends and the well-wishers to your cause, add something to your thought and genius? Or is that sublime of reason and that power of eloquence, which you discover in public, no more than what you

[D] As early as the publication, at the Hague in 1709, of a French translation of the first edition of this work, the prelate was identified as Edward Fowler, bishop of Gloucester. However, he was not identified in any of the editions of *Characteristics* published by John Darby (those of 1711, 1714, 1723, 1727, 1732, 1737). Fowler (1632–1714) was a latitudinarian divine, appointed bishop of Gloucester in 1691. He has been identified as the author of *Reflections upon A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm, to my Lord* *** (1709), one of the responses to the original publication of *A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm*; however, these *Reflections* do not indicate that the bishop took particular umbrage at this reference. It is known, however, that Fowler supplied stories of the supernatural to Henry More who included them in *Sadducismus Triumphatus, or Full and Plain Evidence Concerning Witches and Apparitions* (1681), his reworking of an earlier work by Joseph Glanvill. See A. Rupert Hall, *Henry More* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 137–42.

are equally master of in private and can command at any time alone or with indifferent company or in any easy or cool hour? This indeed were more godlike; but ordinary humanity, I think, reaches not so high.

For my own part, my Lord, I have really so much need of some considerable presence or company to raise my thoughts on any occasion that, when alone, I must endeavour by strength of fancy to supply this want and, in default of a Muse, must inquire out some great man of a more than ordinary genius, whose imagined presence may inspire me with more than what I feel at ordinary hours. And thus, my Lord, have I chosen to address myself to your Lordship, though without subscribing my name, allowing you, as a stranger, the full liberty of reading no more than what you may have a fancy for, but reserving to myself the privilege of imagining you read all with particular notice, as a friend, and one whom I may justifiably treat with the intimacy and freedom which follows.

Section 2

If the knowing well how to expose any infirmity or vice were a sufficient security for the virtue which is contrary, how excellent an age might we be presumed to live in! Never was there in our nation a time known when folly and extravagance of every kind were more sharply inspected or more wittily ridiculed. And one might hope, at least, from this good symptom that our age was in no declining state since, whatever our distempers are, we stand so well affected to our remedies. To bear the being told of faults is in private persons the best token of amendment. It is seldom that a public is thus disposed. For where jealousy of state or the ill lives of the great people or any other cause is powerful enough to restrain the freedom of censure in any part, it in effect destroys the benefit of it in the whole. There can be no impartial and free censure of manners where any peculiar custom or national opinion is set apart, and not only exempted from criticism but even flattered with the highest art. It is only in a free nation, such as ours, that imposture has no privilege and that neither the credit of a court, the power of a nobility, nor the awfulness of a church can give her protection or hinder her from being arraigned in every shape and appearance. It is true, this liberty may seem to run too far. We may perhaps be said to make ill use of it. So everyone will say when he himself is touched and his opinion freely examined. But who shall be judge of what may be freely examined and what may not, where liberty may be used and where it may not? What remedy shall we prescribe to this in general? Can there be a better than from that liberty itself which is complained of? If men are vicious, petulant or abusive, the magistrate may correct them. But if they reason ill, it is reason still must teach them to do better. Justness of thought and style, refinement in manners, good breeding and politeness of every kind can come only from the trial and experience of what is best. Let but the search go freely

on, and the right measure of every thing will soon be found. Whatever humour has got the start, if it be unnatural, it cannot hold, and the ridicule, if ill-placed at first, will certainly fall at last where it deserves.

I have often wondered to see men of sense so mightily alarmed at the approach of anything like ridicule on certain subjects, as if they mistrusted their own judgment. For what ridicule can lie against reason? Or how can anyone of the least justness of thought endure a ridicule wrong-placed? Nothing is more ridiculous than this itself. The vulgar, indeed, may swallow any sordid jest, any mere drollery or buffoonery, but it must be a finer and truer wit which takes with the men of sense and breeding. How comes it to pass, then, that we appear such cowards in reasoning and are so afraid to stand the test of ridicule? 'Oh,' say we, 'the subjects are too grave.' Perhaps so, but let us see first whether they are really grave or no, for, in the manner we may conceive them they may peradventure be very grave and weighty in our imagination, but very ridiculous and impertinent in their own nature. Gravity is of the very essence of imposture. It does not only make us mistake other things, but is apt perpetually almost to mistake itself. For even in common behaviour, how hard is it for the grave character to keep long out of the limits of the formal one? We can never be too grave if we can be assured we are really what we suppose. And we can never too much honour or revere anything for grave if we are assured the thing is grave, as we apprehend it. The main point is to know always true gravity from the false, and this can only be by carrying the rule constantly with us and freely applying it not only to the things about us but to ourselves. For if unhappily we lose the measure in ourselves, we shall soon lose it in everything besides. Now what rule or measure is there in the world, except in the considering of the real temper of things, to find which are truly serious and which ridiculous? And how can this be done unless by applying the ridicule to see whether it will bear?[3] But if we fear to apply this rule in anything, what security can we have against the imposture of formality in all things? We have allowed ourselves to be formalists[E] in one point, and the same formality may rule us as it pleases in all other.

It is not in every disposition that we are capacitated to judge of things. We must beforehand judge of our own temper and, accordingly, of other things which fall under our judgment. But we must never more pretend to judge of things, or of our own temper in judging them, when we have given up our preliminary right of judgment and, under a presumption of gravity, have allowed ourselves to be most ridiculous and to admire profoundly the most ridiculous things in nature, at least for ought we know. For having resolved

[E] In Shaftesbury's vocabulary, the formalist was the person who sustained his views through self-solemnity and what Shaftesbury regarded as the imposture of gravity.

[3] See pp. 29, 36.

never to try, we can never be sure. *Mirth, for the most part, cuts through weighty matters with greater firmness and ease than seriousness.*[4] This, my Lord, I may safely aver is so true in itself, and so well known for truth by the cunning formalists of the age, that they can better bear to have their impostures railed at, with all the bitterness and vehemence imaginable, than to have them touched ever so gently in this other way. They know very well that, as modes and fashions, so opinions, though ever so ridiculous, are kept up by solemnity, and that those formal notions, which grew up probably in an ill mood and have been conceived in sober sadness, are never to be removed but in a sober kind of cheerfulness and by a more easy and pleasant way of thought. There is a melancholy which accompanies all enthusiasm.[F] Be it love or religion (for there are enthusiasms in both), nothing can put a stop to the growing mischief of either, till the melancholy be removed and the mind at liberty to hear what can be said against the ridiculousness of an extreme in either way.

It was heretofore the wisdom of some wise nations to let people be fools as much as they pleased and never to punish seriously what deserved only to be laughed at and was, after all, best cured by that innocent remedy.[G] There are certain humours in mankind which of necessity must have vent. The human mind and body are both of them naturally subject to commotions, and, as there are strange ferments in the blood, which in many bodies occasion an extraordinary discharge, so in reason, too, there are heterogeneous particles which must be thrown off by fermentation. Should physicians endeavour absolutely to allay those ferments of the body and strike in the humours which discover themselves in such eruptions, they might, instead of making a cure, bid fair perhaps to raise a plague and turn a spring ague or an autumn surfeit into an epidemical malignant fever. They are certainly as ill physicians in the body politic who would needs be tampering with these mental eruptions and, under the specious pretence of healing this itch of superstition and saving souls from the contagion of enthusiasm, should set all nature in an uproar and turn a few innocent carbuncles into an inflammation and mortal gangrene.

We read in history that Pan, when he accompanied Bacchus in an expedition to the Indies, found means to strike a terror through a host of enemies by

[F] Melancholy or melancholia, 'black bile', was one of four temperaments or humours in classical medical psychology (along with the sanguine, the choleric and the phlegmatic). It was also regarded as a mental disease. In both senses, it was long associated with enthusiasm. On the relation between melancholy and enthusiasm and for some of the psycho-physiological language on which Shaftesbury drew here, see Michael Heyd, *'Be Sober and Reasonable': The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), pp. 44–71, 214–19.

[G] As Shaftesbury made clear below, these 'wise nations' were the Greek and Roman polities of classical antiquity.

[4] Horace, *Satires* 1.10.14–15.

the help of a small company, whose clamours he managed to good advantage among the echoing rocks and caverns of a woody vale. The hoarse bellowing of the caves, joined to the hideous aspect of such dark and desert places, raised such a horror in the enemy that, in this state, their imagination helped them to hear voices and doubtless to see forms too, which were more than human, while the uncertainty of what they feared made their fear yet greater and spread it faster by implicit looks than any narration could convey it.[5] And this was what in aftertimes men called a 'panic'. The story indeed gives a good hint of the nature of this passion, which can hardly be without some mixture of enthusiasm and horrors of a superstitious kind.

One may with good reason call every passion 'panic' which is raised in a multitude and conveyed by aspect or, as it were, by contact or sympathy. Thus, popular fury may be called 'panic' when the rage of the people, as we have sometimes known, has put them beyond themselves, especially where religion has had to do.[6] And in this state their very looks are infectious. The fury flies from face to face, and the disease is no sooner seen than caught. They who in a better situation of mind have beheld a multitude under the power of this passion, have owned that they saw in the countenances of men something more ghastly and terrible than at other times is expressed on the most passionate occasions. Such force has society in ill as well as in good passions, and so much stronger any affection is for being social and communicative.[7]

Thus, my Lord, there are many panics in mankind besides merely that of fear. And thus is religion also panic when enthusiasm of any kind gets up as oft, on melancholy occasions, it will. For vapours naturally rise and, in bad times especially, when the spirits of men are low, as either in public calamities or during the unwholesomeness of air or diet, or when convulsions happen in nature, storms, earthquakes or other amazing prodigies——at this season the panic must needs run high, and the magistrate of necessity give way to it. For to apply a serious remedy and bring the sword or *fasces*[H] as a cure must make the case more melancholy and increase the very cause of the distemper. To forbid men's natural fears and to endeavour the overpowering them by other fears, must needs be a most unnatural method. The magistrate, if he be any artist, should have a gentler hand and, instead of caustics, incisions and amputations, should be using the softest balms, and, with a kind sympathy,

[H] The symbol of the power of the Roman magistracy, a bundle of rods from which protruded the blade of an axe bound within.

[5] Polyaenus, *Stratagems* 1.2. [Bacchus, or Dionysus, was the focus of an ancient Greek cult in which worshippers pursued ecstasy through wild dancing, intoxication and other orgiastic behaviours. Pan was a deity associated with the fertility of flocks and could produce flock-like stampedes among humans, namely, 'panics'.]

[6] See pp. 23, 367n.

[7] See pp. 51, 201, 203–4, 212.

entering into the concern of the people and taking, as it were, their passion upon him, should, when he has soothed and satisfied it, endeavour, by cheerful ways, to divert and heal it.

This was ancient policy and, hence (as a notable author of our nation expresses it), it is necessary a people should have a 'public leading' in religion.[8] For to deny the magistrate a worship or take away a national church is as mere enthusiasm as the notion which sets up persecution. For why should there not be public walks as well as private gardens? Why not public libraries as well as private education and home tutors? But to prescribe bounds to fancy and speculation, to regulate men's apprehensions and religious beliefs or fears, to suppress by violence the natural passion of enthusiasm or to endeavour to ascertain it or reduce it to one species or bring it under any one modification is in truth no better sense, nor deserves a better character, than what the comedian declares of the like project in the affair of love: *You would do no more good than if you took pains to be methodically mad*.[9] Not only the visionaries and enthusiasts of all kinds were tolerated, your Lordship knows, by the ancients; but, on the other side, philosophy had as free a course and was permitted as a balance against superstition. And while some sects, such as the Pythagorean and latter Platonic, joined in with the superstition and enthusiasm of the times, the Epicurean, the Academic and others were allowed to use all the force of wit and raillery against it. And thus matters were happily balanced: reason had fair play; learning and science flourished. Wonderful was the harmony and temper which arose from all these contrarieties. Thus superstition and enthusiasm were mildly treated and, being let alone, they never raged to that degree as to occasion bloodshed, wars, persecutions and devastations in the world. But a new sort of policy, which extends itself to another world and considers the future lives and happiness of men rather than the present, has made us leap the bounds of natural humanity and, out of a supernatural charity, has taught us the way of plaguing one another most devoutly. It has raised an antipathy which no temporal interest could ever do and entailed upon us a mutual hatred to all eternity.[10] And now uniformity in opinion (a hopeful project!) is looked on as the only expedient against this evil. The saving of souls is now the heroic passion of exalted spirits and is become in a manner the chief care of the magistrate and the very end of government itself.

[8] Harrington. [James Harrington, 1611–77, was a political theorist best known for the propagation of republican ideas inspired by classical history and the writings of Machiavelli. His most important work was *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656). He used the expression 'public leading' in *The Art of Lawgiving* (1659) and *A System of Politics*, first published in John Toland's 1700 edition of Harrington, which Shaftesbury owned. See J. G. A. Pocock, ed., *The Political Works of James Harrington* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 678, 845.]

[9] Terence, *The Eunuch* 1.62–3.

[10] See pp. 364–5, 373.

If magistracy should vouchsafe to interpose thus much in other sciences, I am afraid we should have as bad logic as bad mathematics and, in every kind, as bad philosophy as we often have divinity in countries where a precise orthodoxy is settled by law. It is a hard matter for a government to settle wit. If it does but keep us sober and honest, it is likely we shall have as much ability in our spiritual as in our temporal affairs, and, if we can but be trusted, we shall have wit enough to save ourselves when no prejudice lies in the way. But if honesty and wit be insufficient for this saving work, it is in vain for the magistrate to meddle with it, since, if he be ever so virtuous or wise, he may be as soon mistaken as another man. I am sure the only way to save men's sense or preserve wit at all in the world is to give liberty to wit. Now wit can never have its liberty where the freedom of raillery is taken away, for against serious extravagances and splenetic humours there is no other remedy than this.

We have indeed full power over all other modifications of spleen. We may treat other enthusiasms as we please. We may ridicule love or gallantry or knight-errantry to the utmost, and we find that, in these latter days of wit, the humour of this kind, which was once so prevalent, is pretty well declined. The Crusades, the rescuing of Holy Lands and such devout gallantries are in less request than formerly. But, if something of this militant religion, something of this soul-rescuing spirit and saint-errantry, prevails still, we need not wonder when we consider in how solemn a manner we treat this distemper and how preposterously we go about to cure enthusiasm.

I can hardly forbear fancying that, if we had a sort of inquisition or formal court of judicature, with grave officers and judges, erected to restrain poetical licence and in general to suppress that fancy and humour of versification (but in particular that most extravagant passion of love, as it is set out by poets, in its heathenish dress of Venuses and Cupids), if the poets, as ringleaders and teachers of this heresy, were, under grievous penalties, forbid to enchant the people by their vein of rhyming, and if the people, on the other side, were, under proportionable penalties, forbid to hearken to any such charm or lend their attention to any love tale, so much as in a play, a novel or a ballad, we might perhaps see a new Arcadia arising out of this heavy persecution. Old people and young would be seized with a versifying spirit. We should have field-conventicles of lovers and poets. Forests would be filled with romantic shepherds and shepherdesses, and rocks resound with echoes of hymns and praises offered to the powers of love. We might indeed have a fair chance, by this management, to bring back the whole train of heathen gods and set our cold northern island burning with as many altars to Venus and Apollo as were formerly in Cyprus, Delos or any of those warmer Grecian climates.

Section 3

But, my Lord, you may perhaps wonder that, having been drawn into such a

serious subject as religion, I should forget myself so far as to give way to raillery and humour. I must own, my Lord, it is not merely through chance that this has happened. To say truth, I hardly care so much as to think on this subject, much less to write on it, without endeavouring to put myself in as good humour as is possible. People, indeed, who can endure no middle temper but are all air and humour, know little of the doubts and scruples of religion and are safe from any immediate influence of devout melancholy or enthusiasm, which requires more deliberation and thoughtful practice to fix itself in a temper and grow habitual. But be the habit what it will, to be delivered of it at so sad a cost as inconsiderateness or madness is what I would never wish to be my lot. I had rather stand all adventures with religion than endeavour to get rid of the thoughts of it by diversion. All I contend for is to think of it in a right humour, and that this goes more than halfway towards thinking rightly of it, is what I shall endeavour to demonstrate.

Good humour is not only the best security against enthusiasm but the best foundation of piety and true religion, for, if right thoughts and worthy apprehensions of the Supreme Being are fundamental to all true worship and adoration, it is more than probable that we shall never miscarry in this respect, except through ill humour only. Nothing beside ill humour, either natural or forced, can bring a man to think seriously that the world is governed by any devilish or malicious power. I very much question whether anything besides ill humour can be the cause of atheism. For there are so many arguments to persuade a man in humour that, in the main, all things are kindly and well disposed, that one would think it impossible for him to be so far out of conceit with affairs as to imagine they all ran at adventures and that the world, as venerable and wise a face as it carried, had neither sense nor meaning in it. This however I am persuaded of, that nothing beside ill humour can give us dreadful or ill thoughts of a Supreme Manager. Nothing can persuade us of sullenness or sourness in such a being, beside the actual sore feeling of somewhat of this kind within ourselves. And, if we are afraid of bringing good humour into religion or thinking with freedom and pleasantness on such a subject as God, it is because we conceive the subject so like ourselves and can hardly have a notion of majesty and greatness without stateliness and moroseness accompanying it.

This, however, is the just reverse of that character which we own to be most divinely good, when we see it, as we sometimes do, in men of highest power among us. If they pass for truly good, we dare treat them freely and are sure they will not be displeased with this liberty. They are doubly gainers by this goodness of theirs. For the more they are searched into and familiarly examined, the more their worth appears, and the discoverer, charmed with his success, esteems and loves more than ever, when he has proved this additional bounty in his superior and reflects on that candour and generosity he has

experienced. Your Lordship knows more perhaps of this mystery than anyone. How else should you have been so beloved in power, and out of power so adhered to and still more beloved?[I]

Thank Heaven! there are even in our own age some such examples. In former ages there have been many such. We have known mighty princes and even emperors of the world who could bear unconcernedly not only the free censure of their actions, but the most spiteful reproaches and calumnies, even to their faces. Some perhaps may wish there had never been such examples found in heathens, but, more especially, that the occasion had never been given by Christians. It was more the misfortune indeed of mankind in general than of Christians in particular that some of the earlier Roman emperors were such monsters of tyranny and began a persecution, not on religious men merely, but on all who were suspected of worth or virtue. What could have been a higher honour or advantage to Christianity than to be persecuted by a Nero?[J] But better princes who came after were persuaded to remit these severe courses. It is true the magistrate might possibly have been surprised with the newness of a notion, which he might pretend, perhaps, did not only destroy the sacredness of his power, but treated him and all men as profane, impious and damned, who entered not into certain particular modes of worship, of which there had been formerly so many thousand instituted, all of them compatible and sociable till that time. However, such was the wisdom of some succeeding ministries that the edge of persecution was much abated, and even that prince, who was esteemed the greatest enemy of the Christian sect and who himself had been educated in it, was a great restrainer of persecution, and would allow of nothing further than a resumption of church lands and public schools, without any attempt on the goods or persons, even of those who branded the state religion and made a merit of affronting the public worship.[11]

It is well we have the authority of a sacred author in our religion to assure us that the spirit of love and humanity is above that of martyrs.[12] Otherwise, one might be a little scandalized, perhaps, at the history of many of our prim-

[I] Somers' power was at a peak during the reign of William III, when he was Lord Chancellor. However, with the Whigs generally, he lost power at the accession in 1702 of Anne, who had a particular animus against him.

[J] For Nero, see Introduction, p. xxiii. Though his reign began competently, it deteriorated, making him a symbol of criminal and immoral government. A fire burned much of Rome in AD 64 and, though rumours blamed Nero himself for the fire, he sought to assign responsibility to the Christians of Rome.

[11] See p. 375n. [The reference is to Flavius Claudius Julianus, known as Julian the Apostate, 331–63, Roman Emperor, 361–3. Although brought up a Christian, he underwent a 'pagan conversion'. During his brief reign, he sought to reverse the achievements of Christianity as Rome's official religion and revive the pagan cults.]

[12] 1 Corinthians 13.3.

itive confessors and martyrs, even according to our own accounts. There is hardly now in the world so good a Christian (if this be indeed the mark of a good one) who, if he happened to live at Constantinople or elsewhere under the protection of the Turks, would think it fitting or decent to give any disturbance to their mosque worship. And as good Protestants, my Lord, as you and I are, we should consider him as little better than a rank enthusiast, who, out of hatred to the Romish idolatry, should, in time of High Mass (where Mass perhaps was by law established) interrupt the priest with clamours or fall foul on his images and relics.

There are some, it seems, of our good brethren, the French Protestants, lately come among us, who are mightily taken with this primitive way.[K] They have set afoot the spirit of martyrdom to a wonder in their own country, and they long to be trying it here, if we will give them leave and afford them the occasion – that is to say, if we will only do them the favour to hang or imprison them, if we will only be so obliging as to break their bones for them, after their country fashion, blow up their zeal and stir afresh the coals of persecution. But no such grace can they hitherto obtain of us. So hard-hearted we are that, notwithstanding their own mob are willing to bestow kind blows upon them and fairly stone them now and then in the open street, though the priests of their own nation would gladly give them their desired discipline and are earnest to light their probationary fires for them, we Englishmen, who are masters in our own country, will not suffer the enthusiasts to be thus used. Nor can we be supposed to act thus in envy to their phoenix sect, which it seems has risen out of the flames and would willingly grow to be a new church by the same manner of propagation as the old one, whose seed was truly said to be 'from the blood of the martyrs'.[L]

But how barbarous still and more than heathenishly cruel are we tolerating Englishmen! For, not contented to deny these prophesying enthusiasts the honour of a persecution, we have delivered them over to the cruellest contempt in the world. I am told, for certain, that they are at this very time the subject of a choice droll or puppet-show at Bartholomew Fair.[13] There, doubtless, their strange voices and involuntary agitations are admirably well acted, by the motion of wires and inspiration of pipes. For the bodies of the prophets in their state of prophecy, being not in their own power but (as they say themselves) mere passive organs, actuated by an exterior force, have nothing

[K] See Introduction, p. xxx.

[L] Tertullian, *Apology* 50.13.

[13] Namely, in the year 1707. [Bartholomew Fair, though in its origins a commercial fair, had become an occasion for a variety of entertainments, including theatrical presentations. It was held annually around St Bartholomew's Day, 24 August, at Smithfield, just outside the walls of the City of London.]

natural or resembling real life in any of their sounds or motions, so that how awkwardly soever a puppet-show may imitate other actions, it must needs represent this passion to the life. And while Bartholomew Fair is in possession of this privilege, I dare stand security to our national Church that no sect of enthusiasts, no new venders of prophecy or miracles, shall ever get the start or put her to the trouble of trying her strength with them, in any case.

Happy it was for us, that when Popery had got possession, Smithfield was used in a more tragical way.[M] Many of our first reformers, it is feared, were little better than enthusiasts. And God knows whether a warmth of this kind did not considerably help us in throwing off that spiritual tyranny. So that had not the priests, as is usual, preferred the love of blood to all other passions, they might in a merrier way, perhaps, have evaded the greatest force of our reforming spirit. I never heard that the ancient heathens were so well advised in their ill purpose of suppressing the Christian religion in its first rise as to make use at any time of this Bartholomew Fair method. But this I am persuaded of, that had the truth of the Gospel been any way surmountable, they would have bid much fairer for the silencing it, if they had chosen to bring our primitive founders upon the stage in a pleasanter way than that of bearskins and pitch-barrels.[N]

The Jews were naturally a very cloudy people and would endure little raillery in anything, much less in what belonged to any religious doctrines or opinions.[14] Religion was looked upon with a sullen eye, and hanging was the only remedy they could prescribe for anything which looked like setting up a new revelation. The sovereign argument was 'Crucify, crucify!' But with all their malice and inveteracy to our Saviour and his apostles after him, had they but taken the fancy to act such puppet-shows in his contempt as at this hour the Papists are acting in his honour, I am apt to think they might possibly have done our religion more harm than by all their other ways of severity.

I believe our great and learned apostle found less advantage from the easy treatment of his Athenian antagonists than from the surly and cursed spirit of

[M] Smithfield was also the site of public executions for many centuries. In particular, some 200 Protestants were executed here during the reign of Mary I (Mary Tudor, 'Bloody Mary'), 1516–58, reigned 1553–8. 'Popery' here referred to her Catholicism.

[N] An allusion to Tacitus' description, *Annals* 15.44, of Nero's persecution of Christians after the fire of AD 64, during which some Christians, clothed in the skins of wild animals, were fed to dogs and others were burnt on the crosses on which they had been crucified.

[14] Our author having been censured for this and some following passages concerning the Jews, the reader is referred to the notes and citations on pp. 361–3, 387ff; see also pp. 126–7. [Shaftesbury was not alone among deists in finding fault with both ancient Hebrews and modern Jews, who were said to exemplify, among other things, theocracy, ritualism and dogmatism: see Todd M. Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian London 1714–1830: Tradition and Change in a Liberal Society* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), pp. 96–8.]

the most persecuting Jewish cities.[15] He made less improvement of the candour and civility of his Roman judges than of the zeal of the synagogue and vehemence of his national priests. Though when I consider this apostle as appearing either before the witty Athenians or before a Roman court of judicature in the presence of their great men and ladies, and see how handsomely he accommodates himself to the apprehensions and temper of those politer people, I do not find that he declines the way of wit or good humour, but, without suspicion of his cause, is willing generously to commit it to this proof and try it against the sharpness of any ridicule which might be offered.

But, though the Jews were never pleased to try their wit or malice this way against our Saviour or his apostles, the irreligious part of the heathens had tried it long before against the best doctrines and best characters of men which had ever arisen among them. Nor did this prove in the end any injury, but, on the contrary, the highest advantage to those very characters and doctrines, which, having stood the proof, were found so solid and just. The divinest man who had ever appeared in the heathen world was in the height of witty times and by the wittiest of all poets most abominably ridiculed in a whole comedy, written and acted on purpose.[O] But so far was this from sinking his reputation or suppressing his philosophy that they each increased the more for it, and he apparently grew to be more the envy of other teachers. He was not only contented to be ridiculed, but, that he might help the poet as much as possible, he presented himself openly in the theatre, that his real figure (which was no advantageous one) might be compared with that which the witty poet had brought as his representative on the stage. Such was his good humour! Nor could there be in the world a greater testimony of the invincible goodness of the man, or a greater demonstration that there was no imposture either in his character or opinions. For that imposture should dare sustain the encounter of a grave enemy is no wonder. A solemn attack, she knows, is not of such danger to her. There is nothing she abhors or dreads like pleasantness and good humour.

Section 4

In short, my Lord, the melancholy way of treating religion is that which, according to my apprehension, renders it so tragical and is the occasion of its acting in reality such dismal tragedies in the world. And my notion is that,

[O] Socrates, for whom see Introduction, p. xxiv, as mocked by Aristophanes, Greek comic playwright, *c.* 450–*c.* 385 BC, in *The Clouds*. The anecdote that follows was based on Aelian, *Miscellany* 2.13.

[15] What advantages he made of his sufferings and how pathetically his bonds and stripes were set to view and often pleaded by him to raise his character and advance the interest of Christianity, anyone who reads his epistles and is well acquainted with his manner and style may easily observe. [That is, St Paul.]

provided we treat religion with good manners, we can never use too much good humour or examine it with too much freedom and familiarity. For, if it be genuine and sincere, it will not only stand the proof but thrive and gain advantage from hence. If it be spurious or mixed with any imposture, it will be detected and exposed.

The melancholy way in which we have been taught religion makes us unapt to think of it in good humour. It is in adversity chiefly or in ill health, under affliction, or disturbance of mind, or discomposure of temper, that we have recourse to it, though in reality we are never so unfit to think of it as at such a heavy and dark hour. We can never be fit to contemplate anything above us when we are in no condition to look into ourselves and calmly examine the temper of our own mind and passions. For then it is we see wrath and fury and revenge and terrors in the Deity – when we are full of disturbances and fears within and have, by sufferance and anxiety, lost so much of the natural calm and easiness of our temper.

We must not only be in ordinary good humour, but in the best of humours and in the sweetest, kindest disposition of our lives, to understand well what true goodness is and what those attributes imply which we ascribe with such applause and honour to the Deity. We shall then be able to see best whether those forms of justice, those degrees of punishment, that temper of resentment and those measures of offence and indignation, which we vulgarly suppose in God, are suitable to those original ideas of goodness, which the same Divine Being, or Nature under him, has implanted in us and which we must necessarily presuppose, in order to give him praise or honour in any kind. This, my Lord, is the security against all superstition – to remember that there is nothing in God but what is God-like and that he is either not at all or truly and perfectly good. But when we are afraid to use our reason freely, even on that very question, 'whether he really be or not', we then actually presume him bad and flatly contradict that pretended character of goodness and greatness, while we discover this mistrust of his temper and fear his anger and resentment, in the case of this freedom of inquiry.

We have a notable instance of this freedom in one of our sacred authors. As patient as Job is said to be, it cannot be denied that he makes bold enough with God and takes his Providence roundly to task. His friends, indeed, plead hard with him and use all arguments, right or wrong, to patch up objections and set the affairs of Providence upon an equal foot. They make a merit of saying all the good they can of God at the very stretch of their reason, and sometimes quite beyond it. But this, in Job's opinion, is 'flattering God', 'accepting of God's person', and even 'mocking him'.[16] And no wonder. For what merit can there be in believing God or his Providence upon frivolous and weak grounds?

[16] Job 13.7–10.

What virtue in assuming an opinion contrary to the appearance of things, and resolving to hear nothing which may be said against it? Excellent character of the God of Truth! that he should be offended at us for having refused to put the lie upon our understandings, as much as in us lay, and be satisfied with us for having believed, at a venture and against our reason, what might have been the greatest falsehood in the world, for anything we could bring as a proof or evidence to the contrary!

It is impossible that any besides an ill-natured man can wish against the being of a God, for this is wishing against the public and even against one's private good too, if rightly understood. But if a man has not any such ill will to stifle his belief, he must have surely an unhappy opinion of God and believe him not so good by far as he knows himself to be, if he imagines that an impartial use of his reason, in any matter of speculation whatsoever, can make him run any risk hereafter, and that a mean denial of his reason and an affectation of belief in any point too hard for his understanding can entitle him to any favour in another world. This is being sycophants in religion, mere parasites of devotion. It is using God as the crafty beggars use those they address to, when they are ignorant of their quality.[17] The novices among them may innocently come out perhaps with a 'Good Sir!' or a 'Good Forsooth!'; but with the old stagers, no matter whom they meet in a coach, it is always 'Good your Honour!' or 'Good your Lordship!' or 'Your Ladyship!' For if there should be really a Lord in the case, we should be undone (say they) for want of giving the title, but, if the party should be no Lord, there would be no offence – it would not be ill taken.

And thus it is in religion. We are highly concerned how to beg right, and think all depends upon hitting the title and making a good guess. It is the most beggarly refuge imaginable, which is so mightily cried up and stands as a great maxim with many able men, that 'they should strive to have faith and believe to the utmost, because if, after all, there be nothing in the matter, there will be no harm in being thus deceived, but, if there be anything, it will be fatal for them not to have believed to the full'.[p] But they are so far mistaken that, while they have this thought, it is certain they can never believe either to their satisfaction and happiness in this world, or with any advantage of recommendation to another. For besides that our reason, which knows the cheat, will

[p] The 'maxim' here was a simplification of the so–called 'wager' on belief articulated by Blaise Pascal, French mathematician, scientist and moralist, 1623–62, in the fragment 'Infinity nothingness' [No. 680]: see Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford and London: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 152–8. Various English writers, including John Locke, White Kennett and John Tillotson, adopted or echoed Pascal's arguments: see John Barker, *Strange Contrarieties: Pascal in England during the Age of Reason* (Montreal and London: McGill–Queen's University Press, 1975), pp. 50–2, 133–4.

[17] See pp. 391–2.

never rest thoroughly satisfied on such a bottom but turn us often adrift and toss us in a sea of doubt and perplexity, we cannot but actually grow worse in our religion, and entertain a worse opinion still of a Supreme Deity, while our belief is founded on so injurious a thought of him.

To love the public, to study universal good, and to promote the interest of the whole world, as far as lies within our power, is surely the height of goodness and makes that temper which we call 'divine'. In this temper, my Lord (for surely you should know it well), it is natural for us to wish that others should partake with us by being convinced of the sincerity of our example. It is natural for us to wish our merit should be known, particularly if it be our fortune to have served a nation as a good minister or, as some prince or father of a country, to have rendered happy a considerable part of mankind under our care. But if it happened that of this number there should be some so ignorantly bred and of so remote a province as to have lain out of the hearing of our name and actions or, hearing of them, should be so puzzled with odd and contrary stories told up and down concerning us that they knew not what to think, whether there were really in the world any such person as ourself, should we not, in good truth, be ridiculous to take offence at this? And should we not pass for extravagantly morose and ill-humoured if, instead of treating the matter in raillery, we should think in earnest of revenging ourselves on the offending parties who, out of their rustic ignorance, ill judgment or incredulity, had detracted from our renown?

How shall we say then? Does it really deserve praise to be thus concerned about it? Is the doing good for glory's sake so divine a thing? Or is it not diviner to do good even where it may be thought inglorious, even to the ungrateful and to those who are wholly insensible of the good they receive? How comes it then that what is so divine in us should lose its character in the Divine Being? And that according as the Deity is represented to us, he should more resemble the weak, womanish and impotent part of our nature than the generous, manly and divine?[18]

Section 5

One would think, my Lord, it were in reality no hard thing to know our own weaknesses at first sight and distinguish the features of human frailty with which we are so well acquainted. One would think it were easy to understand that provocation and offence, anger, revenge, jealousy in point of honour or power, love of fame, glory and the like, belong only to limited beings and are necessarily excluded a being which is perfect and universal. But if we have never settled with ourselves any notion of what is morally excellent, or if we cannot trust to that reason which tells us that nothing beside what is so can have place in

[18] See pp. 148, 467.

the Deity, we can neither trust to anything which others relate of him or which he himself reveals to us. We must be satisfied beforehand that he is good and cannot deceive us. Without this, there can be no real religious faith or confidence. Now, if there be really something previous to revelation, some antecedent demonstration of reason, to assure us that God is and, withal, that he is so good as not to deceive us, the same reason, if we will trust to it, will demonstrate to us that God is so good as to exceed the very best of us in goodness. And after this manner we can have no dread or suspicion to render us uneasy, for it is malice only, and not goodness, which can make us afraid.

There is an odd way of reasoning, but in certain distempers of mind very sovereign to those who can apply it, and it is this: 'There can be no malice but where interests are opposed. A universal being can have no interest opposite and therefore can have no malice.' If there be a general mind, it can have no *particular* interest; but the general good or good of the whole and its own private good must of necessity be one and the same. It can intend nothing besides, nor aim at any thing beyond, nor be provoked to anything contrary. So that we have only to consider whether there be really such a thing as a mind which has relation to the whole or not. For if unhappily there be no mind, we may comfort ourselves, however, that nature has no malice. If there be really a mind, we may rest satisfied that it is the best-natured one in the world. The last case, one would imagine, should be the most comfortable, and the notion of a common parent less frightful than that of forlorn nature and a fatherless world. Though, as religion stands among us, there are many good people who would have less fear in being thus exposed and would be easier perhaps in their minds if they were assured they had only mere chance to trust to. For nobody trembles to think there should be no God, but rather that there should be one. This however would be otherwise if Deity were thought as kindly of as Humanity, and we could be persuaded to believe that, if there really was a God, the highest goodness must of necessity belong to him, without any of those defects of passion, those meannesses and imperfections, which we acknowledge such in ourselves, which as good men we endeavour all we can to be superior to and which we find we every day conquer as we grow better.[19]

Methinks, my Lord, it would be well for us if, before we ascended into the higher regions of divinity, we would vouchsafe to descend a little into ourselves and bestow some poor thoughts upon plain honest morals.[20] When we had once looked into ourselves and distinguished well the nature of our own affections, we should probably be fitter judges of the divineness of a character

[19] 'For my own part', says honest Plutarch, 'I had rather men should say of me that "there neither is, nor ever was, such a one as Plutarch" than they should say that "there was a Plutarch, an unsteady, changeable, easily provokable and revengeful man"' (Plutarch, *Superstition* 10 [*Moralia* 169–70]). See p. 391.

[20] See pp. 354, 424n.

and discern better what affections were suitable or unsuitable to a perfect being. We might then understand how to love and praise when we had acquired some consistent notion of what was laudable or lovely. Otherwise we might chance to do God little honour when we intended him the most. For it is hard to imagine what honour can arise to the Deity from the praises of creatures who are unable to discern what is praiseworthy or excellent in their own kind.

If a musician were cried up to the skies by a certain set of people who had no ear in music, he would surely be put to the blush and could hardly, with a good countenance, accept the benevolence of his auditors, till they had acquired a more competent apprehension of him and could by their own senses find out something really good in his performance. Till this were brought about, there would be little glory in the case, and the musician, though ever so vain, would have little reason to be contented.

They who affect praise the most had rather not be taken notice of than be impertinently applauded. I know not how it comes about that He who is ever said to do good the most disinterestedly should be thought desirous of being praised so lavishly, and be supposed to set so high a rate upon so cheap and low a thing as ignorant commendation and forced applause.

It is not the same with goodness as with other qualities, which we may understand very well and yet not possess. We may have an excellent ear in music without being able to perform in any kind. We may judge well of poetry without being poets or possessing the least of a poetic vein. But we can have no tolerable notion of goodness, without being tolerably good. So that, if the praise of a divine being be so great a part of his worship, we should, methinks, learn goodness, were it for nothing else than that we might learn, in some tolerable manner, how to praise. For the praise of goodness from an unsound hollow heart must certainly make the greatest dissonance in the world.

Section 6

Other reasons, my Lord, there are, why this plain homespun philosophy of looking into ourselves may do us wondrous service in rectifying our errors in religion. For there is a sort of enthusiasm of second hand. And when men find no original commotions in themselves, no prepossessing panic which bewitches them, they are apt still, by the testimony of others, to be imposed on and led credulously into the belief of many false miracles. And this habit may make them variable and of a very inconstant faith, easy to be carried away with every wind of doctrine and addicted to every upstart sect or superstition. But the knowledge of our passions in their very seeds, the measuring well the growth and progress of enthusiasm, and the judging rightly of its natural force and what command it has over our very senses, may teach us to oppose more suc-

cessfully those delusions which come armed with the specious pretext of moral certainty and matter of fact.[21]

The new prophesying sect I made mention of above pretend, it seems, among many other miracles, to have had a most signal one, acted premeditatedly and with warning, before many hundreds of people, who actually give testimony to the truth of it.[Q] But I would only ask whether there were present, among those hundreds, any one person who, having never been of their sect or addicted to their way, will give the same testimony with them? I must not be contented to ask whether such a one had been wholly free of that particular enthusiasm but whether, before that time, he was esteemed of so sound a judgment and clear a head, as to be wholly free of melancholy and in all likelihood incapable of all enthusiasm besides. For, otherwise, the panic may have been caught, the evidence of the senses lost as in a dream, and the imagination so inflamed, as in a moment to have burnt up every particle of judgment and reason. The combustible matters lie prepared within and ready to take fire at a spark, but chiefly in a multitude seized with the same spirit.[22] No wonder if the blaze rises so of a sudden when innumerable eyes glow with the passion and heaving breasts are labouring with inspiration, when not the aspect only but the very breath and exhalations of men are infectious, and the inspiring disease imparts itself by insensible transpiration. I am not a divine good enough to resolve what spirit that was which proved so catching among the ancient prophets that even the profane Saul was taken by it.[23] But I learn from Holy Scripture that there was the *evil* as well as the *good* spirit of prophecy. And I find, by present experience as well as by all histories, sacred and profane, that the operation of this spirit is everywhere the same as to the bodily organs.

A gentleman, who has written lately in defence of revived prophecy and has since fallen himself into the prophetic ecstasies, tells us that 'the ancient prophets had the spirit of God upon them under ecstasy, with diverse strange gestures of body denominating them madmen (or enthusiasts) as appears evidently', says he, 'in the instances of Balaam, Saul, David, Ezekiel, Daniel, etc.'.[R] And he proceeds to justify this by the practice of the apostolic times and by

[Q] Richard B. Wolf argues that the 'signal miracle' referred to Pierre Claris, who safely walked through fire in 1703: see *An Old–Spelling, Critical Edition of Shaftesbury's Letter Concerning Enthusiasm and Sensus Communis* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988), pp. 118–21.

[R] John Lacy in the preface to the second edition of *A Cry from the Desart, or Testimonials of the Miraculous Things Lately Come To Pass in the Cevennes* (London, 1707), a translation of François Maximilien Misson's *Théâtre sacré des Cevennes* (London, 1707), p. x. The parenthetical 'or enthusiasts' was Shaftesbury's insertion in an otherwise accurate quotation. On Lacy, see Introduction, p. xxx.

[21] See pp. 355–6, 367–8.

[22] See p. 367n.

[23] See 1 Kings 22.2ff and 2 Chronicles 18.19ff. See also pp. 387–8.